Part of
Education and childcare during coronavirus

Authored article

HMCI commentary: findings from visits in November

Amanda Spielman discusses what we found in our November visits to education and children's social care providers.

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Throughout the autumn, we have been visiting schools, colleges, early years and social care providers to discuss their experiences since the summer. We have held constructive conversations with leaders about how they have educated and cared for children in the wake of the first national lockdown and the closure of schools to most children.

We wanted to document how children, and older learners, have responded to the dramatic events of the year and how the education and social care sectors have risen to the challenges they have faced. We reported in October and November, explaining how children and young people experienced the COVID crisis in different ways, depending on their circumstances.

This month, in our final set of autumn visit briefings, we can see how education and social care have progressed through the autumn, and the challenges that remain as we look forward in hope of better times ahead in 2021.

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- schools
- further education and skills
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Last month, we described how the events of 2020, and in particular the loss of access to education, affected children differently depending on their circumstances – and particularly the level of support that they received at home. It's very clear that the children growing up with acute challenges faced more significant issues and sometimes greater risks.

In this month's reports, we have described how children who live in secure children's homes have had a difficult experience during the year. These children are vulnerable and many are at risk of self-harm. The guidance on COVID security has added another layer of pressure to an already pressurised system. Children arriving at the homes were put into isolation for 14 days. In effect, this created a form of solitary confinement – and we learned that this removal from contact had resulted in greater anxiety, an increase in self-harm and, in some cases, physical attacks on staff.

Those staff are working hard to support children and there have been some positive signs, including a greater engagement with education by children in secure homes. But, with higher levels of absences due to self-isolation being covered by temporary staff, there is not always the consistency of support that these children need.

Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) have also often struggled with the restrictions placed on them. These children were already less likely to attend full-time education than their peers and concerns about the pandemic has exacerbated this problem. The removal from sight of vulnerable children is worrying on a number of levels. On one level we know children who struggle to access remote education, particularly if their parents are unable to support them; on another are children at risk of abuse or neglect, who are not spending time under the watchful gaze of teachers. The pressure on parents of children with SEND during this period has been particularly acute, made worse by the reduced availability of support services.

For the children who are back in full-time education, the main concern is how we can evaluate and redress the lost learning from last summer. Schools, colleges and early years providers have now had longer to assess their pupils and understand better how much learning has been lost since the first national lockdown. Many school children are thought to be at least 6 months behind where they should be. This loss of learning shows itself differently in different age groups.

In early years and into the start of primary school, leaders reported children who had regressed in both fine and gross motor skills, through lack of practice – whether that's using scissors or having physical confidence around playground equipment. Children whose parents could help them consolidate their learning have proven fairly resilient to the lost time – but many parents were juggling childcare with working and were simply not able to focus their attention in that way. For some of the younger children, we were told that the normal rhythms of the day – eating and sleeping – had been disrupted and needed to be re-established. Social skills, such as sharing and taking turns, needed to be re-learned. Language skills and early progress with reading had slipped back.

In primary schools, there was a widespread view that most pupils had made no real progress over the summer, and that reading and maths were of particular concern. Some secondary leaders noted greater variability: most pupils had 'generally kept up' but some had significant gaps. They attributed this to pupils' different experiences at home during the first national lockdown. There were particular concerns expressed about Year 7, those coming into secondary who had missed out on a proper transition – and Year 11, those preparing for exams.

The task of establishing what pupils are learning through the term has been a tougher challenge for schools. It's clear that wide variations in COVID-driven absence have led to very inconsistent experiences for pupils. Those lucky enough not to have many cases of COVID at their school might have avoided being sent home as part of a bubble – or having to self-isolate after a contact outside school. But for a significant number of pupils, COVID isolation has chipped away at the progress they have been able to make since September.

As I have said before, remote education is better than nothing, but it's no substitute for the classroom. The problem that schools are continuing to grapple with is how to provide meaningful remote education under 2 distinct circumstances: bubble isolation and individual isolation. What we have seen on our visits is that many schools are making real progress with remote provision. Subtleties – including live or recorded online lessons – but individuals who are isolating for a further period of a time often have a poorer experience. Whole bubbles can make some progress through the planned curriculum while they work from home, but many isolated individuals are provided with work that consolidates previous lessons, rather than new material. For these children, the loss of learning they experienced in the summer is being repeated.

In all cases, schools are struggling to assess whether remote learning is effective or not. For many, the measure of success is whether or not children are engaging with the work at all, rather than whether they are developing their knowledge and understanding – a case of remote attendance, rather than remote learning.

And of course, remote learning does not lend itself well to practical subjects – which is a problem in both schools and further education. Even when the learners attend school or college in person, there are considerable challenges to be overcome in delivering practical lessons and vocational courses. This is made harder in further education because of the dramatic loss in apprenticeship placements and in schools by the curtailment of much of the normal extra-curricular activity.

Faced with all of these pressures, the education and social care sectors are showing considerable resilience and creativity to provide children and learners with the best experience they can. In further education, there is good collaboration with local employers to wider support networks to provide opportunities for learners: in social care, creative solutions are in place to help children have contact with families in a COVID-secure way; in schools leaders are using catch-up funding to pay for additional maths and English lessons and for targeted interventions using their own staff or tutors. And all of this is being done against the most challenging backdrop for staff in recent times.

There is no doubt that the constantly shifting guidance for schools, colleges, local authorities and other institutions has taken its toll on staff – alongside the uncertainty created by different permutations of tiers and lockdowns. Leaders described teams that were physically fatigued and stressed. They were often dealing with children and learners who had their own anxieties that needed to be addressed and they were taking on the additional burdens of managing COVID cases and isolation procedures in their setting. Local authority staff were also coordinating the wider local response. It has been an extraordinary year and I would like to record my appreciation for everyone working in education and social care – from childminders and social workers to teachers and college tutors.

And of course, the start of 2021 will be no different to the end of 2020 – and there are live issues that will be taken forward into the new year. I have spoken before about the concerning increase in parents withdrawing children to be educated at home as a result of the pandemic. This month, we report another apparent rise, with three-fifths of schools reporting at least one child removed during the term. This is a worrying trend; in many cases, homeschooling will not be able to provide the level of education that a child will receive at school.

Many parents who have withdrawn their children have told the school they are doing so just for the short term, 'until the pandemic is over'. This suggests there will be a significant number of children returning to school in a very long gap indeed, expecting to catch up. While we might hope that the deployment of a vaccine mitigates this trend, there is a risk that more parents decide to keep children at home waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel to arrive, before returning their children to school, a year or more behind their classmates.

The economic legacy of COVID also looms over local authorities, education and social care providers – and is being felt acutely in the early years and further education sectors. Many apprentices were furloughed and a significant number then lost their placements altogether. The pressures on apprenticeships are unlikely to ease anytime soon. There is also much concern among early years providers: half of nurseries and 60% of childminders that we spoke to expressed worries over the viability of their businesses.

So, while there is real optimism that the end is finally in sight for the sort of restrictions that we currently live under, it's clear that there is a long way to go before the form of education and social care returns to normal; even though their function remains unchanged. This term, the institutions to which we entrust our children – whether for their education or their care – have made considerable progress. But for many children, there is more to be done: to catch them up, to level the playing field and to prepare them well for the next stage in their lives.

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